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Carnival of Words: Applying Bakhtin to Spoken Word Poetry

Molly Clasen
Pacific University

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Abstract

[From the Introduction]

Citizens and senators alike have cited the phrase "United We Stand," yet many Americans doubt this platitude. The wage gap between the rich and poor widens each year, resulting in one percent of the population owning more than a quarter of the nation's wealth (William). Gender, ethnic, and racial prejudices endure despite numerous struggles for equality, including the election of an African American President. Only last year, a southern GOP chairman "joked" how his dog should receive welfare because it's "black, unemployed, lazy, can't speak English, and has no frigging clue who his Daddy is" (Payne). Standing united about any topic seems unlikely in such a socially and politically stratified climate, and rather than working together to heal divisions, our political parties grow increasingly polarized. Yet even as the climate has grown more volatile, an alternative trend has increased both its presence and popularity. Carnavalesque spaces in American culture are providing platforms for transgressing these power structures and culturally defined boundaries of identity. Particularly, Spoken Word Poetry exemplifies a carnivalesque space, allowing to reverse social hierarchies in ways seemingly impossible otherwise given the inequities. Spoken Word creates a Carnavalesque space in America by challenging power structures, re-imagining the body, utilizing all-inclusive humor, and building a strong sense of community.

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Darlene Pagan

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Carnival of Words: Applying Bakhtin to Spoken Word Poetry

Presented By
Molly K. Clasen

In partial fulfillment for the degree
of Bachelor of Arts at Pacific University

May 2011

Darlene Pagán
Professor of English

Pauline Beard, Ph.D.
Chair of the English Department

Carnival of Words: Applying Bakhtin to Spoken Word Poetry

What made the beauty of the moon? And the beauty of the sea?
Did that beauty made you? / Did that beauty make me?
Will that make me something? / Will I be something? / Am I something?
And the answer comes: already am, always was, and I still have time to be.
- Anis Mojgani, "Here am I"

This temporary suspension, both real and ideal, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in every day life.

- Mikhail Bakhtin

Introduction

Citizens and senators alike have cited the phrase "United We Stand," yet many Americans doubt this platitude. The wage gap between the rich and poor widens each year, resulting in one percent of the population owning more than a quarter of the nation's wealth (William). Gender, ethnic, and racial prejudices endure despite numerous struggles for equality, including the election of an African American President. Only last year, a southern GOP chairman "joked" how his dog should receive welfare because it's "black, unemployed, lazy, can't speak English, and has no frigging clue who his Daddy is" (Payne). Standing united about any topic seems unlikely in such a socially and politically stratified climate, and rather than working together to heal divisions, our political parties grow increasingly polarized. Yet even as the climate has grown more volatile, an alternative trend has increased both its presence and popularity. Carnavalesque spaces in American culture are providing platforms for transgressing these power structures and culturally defined boundaries of identity. Particularly, Spoken Word Poetry exemplifies a carnivalesque space, allowing to reverse social hierarchies in ways seemingly impossible otherwise given the inequities. Spoken Word creates a

Carnavalesque space in America by challenging power structures, re-imagining the body, utilizing all-inclusive humor, and building a strong sense of community.

Bakhtin, Spoken Word, and Power Structures

In his study of the novel *Rabelais*, Bakhtin explores how a medieval carnival allowed an escape from the rigidly established power structures:

One might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; *it marked the suspension of hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions*. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal, it was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (686; emphasis added)

This suspension of hierarchy starkly contrasted with the “monolithically serious” (686) official feasts, which Bakhtin describes as “a consecration of inequality” (686). These official feasts revolved around asserting the social hierarchy and maintaining its stability, often involving somber religious ceremonies. Conversely, the carnival allowed a release from social hierarchy—A release which everyone had equal access too. Bakhtin explains that “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people.” The carnival created a space in which all had equal access to challenging power structures.

One can compare the strict and serious medieval feasts with access to modern American politics. Social status immensely influences political opportunities and access, an assertion made evident when examining America’s presidents. Only seven of forty-four presidents have risen from the lower middle class or below (Barnet), and no woman,

homosexual, transsexual, or transgender individual has ever served as president. Only the current president and President Kennedy have ever represented a minority group. Our American dream that anyone can be president seems highly unlikely in light of such statistics. The senate further illustrates America's lack of access to power. The current House of Representatives contains a majority of 332 white people, compared to only forty-two black people and a single Native American (Thisnation.com). A mere seventy-five female representatives work with 360 male representatives (Thisnation.com). When our own government is so politically and socially stratified, is no shock that carnivalesque spaces arise in which Americans can feel a sense of liberty.

Of the many art forms, Spoken Word Poetry in particular creates a carnivalesque space, focused as it is on challenging power structures in both form and content. With its specific emphasis on audience empowerment, poetry slams especially demonstrate the rebellious aspect of Spoken Word. Poetry slams take place at "bars, bookstores, coffee houses, and theaters," attracting a wide demographic of audience members with an atmosphere of "raucous festivity" (Somers-Willet 4) not unlike that of the carnival. Slams are judged by the audience who are encouraged to cheer and holler, thus reversing the normal artist-audience hierarchy where audience members are passive objects of the art. In a slam performance, audience members are interactive creators of the experience whose opinions shape how someone performs and which poets perform most frequently. Professors of poetry and construction workers have an equally valid opinion of poetry and its success or effectiveness, thus deconstructing hierarchies of class and education so prevalent outside of the slam.

Slam poetry further empowers participants by removing the “means of production” that might otherwise control audiences’ access to artists. No editors, dramaturges, publishers, or critics decide who should have the chance to participate in this artistic exchange. Anyone physically present may participate, evaluate, and compete. Anis Mojgani, two-time winner of the National Individual Poetry Slam and winner of the World Cup Poetry Slam, describes this equality of access, highlighting how neither economic nor physical barriers separate artist and audience:

What I love about [Spoken Word]... is there’s no buffer, *there’s no thing that the artist must speak through to engage the audience*. There’s no canvas. There’s no photograph. There’s no film... No book... There’s nothing. It’s an individual who is standing before a person or body of people and says, “Hey. There’s something inside of my heart. There’s something inside of my head. Here it is.”¹
(Emphasis added)

By letting any physically present artist “engage with the audience” (Mojgani), Spoken Word adheres to values of freedom and equality, creating an artistic exchange without mediation.

Spoken Word’s lack of mediation is especially significant when one considers a recent study by VIDA, a grassroots organization dedicated to women in the Literary Arts. This 2010 survey revealed how many major publications overwhelmingly favor work by men. For example, *The New York Review of Books* reviewed 462 books by men and only 79 by women, and *The New Yorker* reviewed four times as many books by male authors than by female authors (“The Count”). Portland based literary magazine *Tin house*

¹ See Appendix I

reviewed twenty-two authors in 2010, only four of which were women (“The Count”). This gender inequity is especially shocking when one acknowledges that American women statistically read more than American men (Fram) and that there are probably just as many, if not more, female writers as there are male. A 2007 poll by the Associated Press stated that the “median figure for books read was nine books for women and five for men” (Fram). Although the Literary Arts are a cultural space for progressive thought and intellectual exchange in America, access to that space is still unequal and contingent on our social hierarchies. When one considers that women in America earn less money than men and have less representation in the government, it is no surprise that the dominant narrative in both nation and literature is overwhelmingly male. Yet as Luis J. Rodriguez states in his article “Crossing Boundaries, Crossing Cultures Poetry: Performance and the New Revolution,” “The capacity of creating poetry is within everyone, and should be everyone’s property, not just a few” (208). Spoken Word adheres to this ideal, creating a space for audiences to have access to poets undeterred by publishing companies’ potentially sexist biases. Like the medieval carnival, it provides escape from the rigidly established social structure that normalizes— and perpetuates— inequality.

This democratic component of Spoken Word is what initially attracts many poets to the art form. Mojgani, for example, cites this unmediated access to an audience as the reason he first pursued slam:

I really thought it was awesome that this thing had been created that said *whoever you are, you’re allowed to participate*. You don’t have to have published this book, or have this degree, or stay with this person. *All you have to do is be an*

individual who is trying to express something inside of you, and have the desire to get up and share it with a room full of people. (Mojgani; emphasis added)

Yet many Spoken Word poems travel far beyond a “room full of people” (Mojgani).

Thanks to the Internet, Spoken Word not only redefines artists’ access to audiences, but audiences’ ability to experience artists. As Mojgani states, “A lot of folks, maybe they put together their little chapbook, and it goes basically to people in that community...

With something like youtube, you’re able to put a video out into the ether, and [reach] five million people.” This direct access to Spoken Word further supports the carnivalesque values of equality, bypassing institutional control and inviting a wide demographic of people to participate.

Orality is another aspect of Spoken Word’s form that challenges power structures by increasing access. While orality requires little formal instruction, literacy and the written word are contingent on education. In “Orality and Literacy,” Alan Durant discusses how “Reading... is not simply a matter of interpretation based on a presumable physical and cognitive process but a *socially formed and very unevenly distributed set of skills and conventions*” (549; emphasis added). Social conditions often dictate one’s interpretive abilities, especially in America where vast discrepancies exist between poor students’ and wealthy students’ literacy abilities. No doubt social status influences students’ ability to formally analyze poetry. Students from a lower socio-economic background often lack the academic skills, conventions, and familiarity with academic terms such as “synecdoche” and “hyperbole” necessary to effective literary analyses. Research attests to the relationship between class and literacy. Although Americans like to imagine education as the great equalizer, children from low socio-economic class tend

to score roughly ten percent below the national average on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests while children from a high socio-economic class score several percent above (Hochschild 822). Hispanics and students of large urban schools drop out of high school more frequently than others (Hochschild 822). The President of the Los Angeles teacher union recently exclaimed “We have kids without teachers, teachers without classrooms, and a district without a clue. The system is broken. Students and teachers are a forgotten priority here” (Hochschild 825). These issues become life long problems because access to education influences their literacy later in life, including what they read or whether they read. A 2007 study by the Associated Press revealed that one in four Americans—mostly “less educated,” “lower income,” “minorities” (Fram) had not read a single book that year. Literacy thus can perpetuate inequality because it is a learned skill dependent on social class and affects one’s ability to rise in society. Access to education, our nation’s “great equalizer,” is sadly unequal and prevents many from participating in conversations about literary art.

It is thus no surprise that so many revolutionary writers have chosen to express themselves through orality. The form in itself is a rebellious and democratic act. As former U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins notes in his essay, “Poems on the page, Poems in the air,” oral poetry requires “a freedom dependent only on the ability to open the mouth—that most democratic of instruments—and speak” (Collins 4). Performance poetry challenges the assumption that written poetry is of more value than the spoken word, and its form invites a wide access of participants. Spoken Word Poetry is particularly rebellious when one considers the traditional literary canon and its absolute lack of oral works of literature. Even traditionally oral pieces such as Homer’s *The*

Odyssey or Shakespeare's plays are often studied in terms of a textual approach, stripping the work of its performative aspects and confining it to letters on a page in a book.

Spoken Word Poetry has remained relatively outside the academic sphere because of this privileging of the written word., and many critics and academics have resisted or disregarded Spoken Word because of this prejudice. In the Spring 2000 issue of *The Paris Review*, Harold Bloom went so far as to claim that slam poems are "Rant and nonsense," insisting that their judgment by audience members and political content are "the death of art" (qtd. in Somers-Willett).

However, politics and art have a long history of interconnectivity. Mojgani cites several historical examples of political innovation and involvement in the arts, directly refuting Bloom's accusation:

Art is a way to explore the truths of what it means to be a person. *There's always been political art.* It has taken different shapes and different forms. *I seriously doubt that Harold Bloom would say that Brecht was the death of art.* And indeed, the majority of Brecht's work was written with the purpose of making political change. The purpose was to write work that hopefully instilled the fire to make change in society. That, to me, is what politics is. Politics is the thing that instills those changes in society... *If one is writing or creating or making art that is trying to instill change in society, then politics definitely has a place in art...* Guernica is a response to war, a war that was created because of political reasons... *Politics is on the shoulder of the individual.* (Emphasis added)

As Mojgani implies, Bloom's negative response to Slam Poetry is itself a political act, politics being "On the shoulder of every individual," and influencing artists and audiences alike. While Bloom seeks to draw boundaries between that which is art and that which is politics, Mojgani suggests that no such boundaries exist. All expression is political because our reality is politically and socially constructed. Furthermore, art that overtly strives to induce social change may be construed differently depending on the political context. Mojgani wisely cites Brecht as an example of political art that was once controversial and is now widely accepted as part of the literary canon. Brecht was even blacklisted in Hollywood and interrogated by the House Un-American Activities Committee during the "Red Scare" (Schwartz). Bloom's prejudice against Slam, like Hollywood's prejudice against Brecht, reflects a certain time's social/political construction of art's value and purpose rather than an objective fact.

Contemporary oral poetry is not so much the "death" of art, but a new, carnivalesque evolution of a cultural tradition. As Mojgani asserts, Bloom's claim that such an art form can suddenly "die" is highly illogical:

It's like saying dance is dead. A two-year-old when they hear music, they respond to it. Dance is very much not dead. No art form is dead. No art form is going to die. It will definitely change, and it may change in a way that we as individuals do not feel is pertinent... but to say that anything will cause the death of art other than the death of a species is impossible.

Like dance, oral poetry is an art form deeply integrated with humanity's history from the Chippewa's love songs to *Beowulf*. Contemporary Spoken Word is merely an innovative development of that form, changing to satisfy modern audiences' unique needs.

For critics such as Bloom to assume all pieces of one form are equally “nonsense” reveals a deeper social assumption about orality and literary value. In her article “Contingencies of Value,” Barbara Herrnstein Smith explores how strong messages of “value” are transmitted in the literary canon:

By providing [readers] with ‘necessary backgrounds,’ teaching them ‘appropriate skills,’ ‘cultivating their interests,’ and, generally, ‘developing their tastes,’ the [literary and aesthetic] academy produces generation after generation of subjects for whom the objects and texts thus labeled do indeed perform the functions thus privileged, and thereby insuring the continuity of mutually defining canonical works, canonical functions, and canonical audiences. (23)

Smith asserts that the literary canon is thus a social structure that perpetuates certain cultural definitions of “function” (23) and “value” (23). Works of value are not objectively arrived at or agreed upon by all—even works that survive long spans of time. Canonical work—largely written by white European or American men—remains celebrated across time, deemed by the academy “necessary” (23) to a person with “develope[d]” (23) literary sensibilities. The Spoken Word movement offers an alternative space to define poetry’s “value,” contingent on an individual’s standards rather than the academy’s. As Smith notes, “What we may call our principles or tastes... others may call our biases and prejudices” (Smith 20). Perhaps the true “death of art,” is not a newly popular outlet for political and personal expression, but ignorant and institutionalized prejudice against this new form.

Anis Mojgani further elaborates on this democratic component of slam, articulating how it emphasizes relevance to people’s lives:

Poetry is not something that is just for two percent of the people. Poetry is for you as well. And to show you that it's for you, you're allowed to say, "I really like this poem, I'm going to give it an eight." "I really don't like that poem, I'm going to give it a two." The power of poetry was given back to people, and they were allowed to say, "This is something that is relevant in my life." (Emphasis added)

A slam poem is not a commodity to be consumed; it is an equalizing relationship between artist and audience. Both give and both receive. Slam allows its audience members to feel confident in their opinions, unlike literary analyses, which require readers to demonstrate their intelligence and ability to "get" decidedly "great" poetry.

So while the form empowers audiences in innovative ways, the content is also rebellious in nature and often challenges power structures. Slam poems often "celebrate marginalized racial, sexual, and gender identities" (Somers-Willet 68), thus creating a space where minorities can assert themselves, similar to the "suspension of hierarchical rank" (Bakhtin 687) in medieval carnivals. This is particularly significant because on the political stage, the physical presence of minorities and women is often severely lacking. Not only are images of minorities scarce, but they are often negative and/or stereotypical when they do appear in the media. An infamous example is the "Two photo" scandal of Hurricane Katrina, in which Associated Press published nearly identical photos of victims waist-deep in water carrying food. One was of a black man, and the caption accused him of "looting a grocery store" ("Hurricane Katrina"). The other depicted a white couple, the caption stating how they had "found bread and soda at a grocery store" ("Hurricane Katrina"). The subtext is obviously racist: a black man "loots" while a white couple

“finds food,” thus perpetuating racial stereotypes through the mass media. Alternatively, Spoken Word Poetry offers minorities access to a platform where they may openly express themselves and relate their narratives unmediated by institutions’ biases.

Bakhtin, Spoken Word, and the Body

In his analysis of the novel *Rabelais*, Bakhtin explores the rejoicing in and re-imagining of the body:

The body element is deeply *positive*. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but *something universal, representing all people...* This is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because *it is not individualized*. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. (688; emphasis added)

While medieval society usually denigrated the corporeal as lower than the spiritual, Bakhtin asserts that the carnival reversed this value. The body became a “positive” (688) symbol of regeneration and renewal. Its ever-changing nature symbolized the potential for evolution in seemingly permanent power structures. Just as the body is always in process in motion, so could society be seen as a cycle of change rather than a fixed state.

This re-imagining of the body corresponds to a Spoken Word Poet’s physical presence onstage. Unlike written poetry, which renders a poet’s body irrelevant, Spoken Word Poetry utilizes a poet’s physicality as part of the artistic experience. The body thus becomes an essential part of the carnivalesque experience, “growing” and “renewed”

(Bakhtin 688) with each performance. Just as the carnival encouraged “changing, playful, undefined forms,” (Bakhtin 687) so does Spoken Word Poetry evoke a liberating sense of fluid physical identity. In physical communion with one another, the literal and symbolic distance between people shrinks. A poet might even inhabit the voice of his or her oppressor, thus undermining an oppressor’s dogma by physically embodying it. Patricia Smith’s poem “Skinhead” particularly exemplifies this. Smith, an African-American woman, performs the poem in the voice of a male, white skinhead (Somers-Willet 70), screaming, “I get hard listening to [black people’s] skin burst... I was born to make things right” (youtube.com). Spoken Word’s oral form allows Smith to expose racist dogma and undermine it by physically embodying it. She ends the poem with the eerie line, “I’m your baby, America, your boy... I was born and raised right here” (youtube.com), reminding listeners that skinheads are not anomalies but products of American culture. Smith’s sheer physical presence onstage as both victim *and* victimizer is an empowering statement impossible in other forms of literature. “Skinhead” demonstrates how Spoken Word creates a carnivalesque space in which the body can be redefined and re-imagined.

Furthermore, Spoken Word Poetry glorifies the physical, visceral experience of a poem rather than the intellectual analysis of it. Judges of poetry slams do not meditate on the poem for a few days, research its symbols, read other scholars’ opinion of the work, and then share their score. They score the poem as soon as the poet finishes her/his performance. Of course, it is important to remember the mantra of poetry slams: “The points are not the point; the point is poetry” (poetryslam.com). However, one can see the points as a symbolic celebration and physical expression of an audience member’s

immediate experience. While American academic culture tends to applaud empiricism, Spoken Word reverses this value and applauds subjectivity—literally. As Poetry Slam founder Marc “So What” Smith elaborates in his essay “About Slam Poetry,” “It’s a show, and you and everything that happens are part of the action. The main character is the audience. The antagonists are the poets. The slam is organized chaos” (119). This emphasis on poetry as a “show” (119) and a type of “chaos” (119) contests the analytical approach to literature. Even the notion of Reader Response Theory, which elevates the readers’ personal reaction to literature, is fairly new and viewed with skepticism by many. Evidently, the academy is not eager to give power to the reader. Yet in Spoken Word, the meaning of a poem is not “out there” in scholarly articles or philosophical theories. It is within an individual at that moment. A performance poem is not a fixed puzzle to be solved, but rather an ephemeral carnivalesque experience in which the audience is physically partaking.

Mojgani elaborates on what he calls the “urgency of being onstage,” further highlighting the ephemeral and ever-changing quality of a Spoken Word Poem that contrasts the academy’s privileging of analytical literary analyses:

It is the audience and the artist together making a piece of art that solely exists within that frame of time and space. That’s really exciting to me. To get to participate and have all these bodies participating. And there’s something really awesome of this collective spirit. Of regardless of the differences, we’re all feeling something. Maybe it’s a different shape but it’s the same color.

(Mojgani; Emphasis added)

This sense of a “collective spirit” directly corresponds to the carnivalesque re-imagining of the body. Both the Carnival and Spoken Word embrace the ephemerality of physical experience, utilizing a sense of continual process inspire hope for change and unity despite diversity.

The manipulation of pronouns further contributes to this reconceptualization of the body. Spoken Word poets often switch between a singular and plural subject, eroding that sense of an individualized identity. For example, in Mojgani’s poem “Here Am I,” he switches from “I” to “We,” creating the impression of a collective identity:

I know my life is like some high school kid’s notebook
 a high school kid that shuffles back and forth between school and home
 stacking the letters and the pictures too close for anyone outside of his own
 imagination to read
 because it's through the ink that his heart beats,
 that his heart breaths
 and we all just wanted to write these notes

check if you like me
 check if you don't
 check if you'll date me
 check if you won't

because we all wanted the love songs to be true
 and we did love dinosaurs once
 and we wanted the stars to hold our hands... (Indiefeed)

Mojgani starts this section using a singular pronoun, stating, “I know my life is like some high school kid’s notebook...” (Indiefeed; emphasis added). He uses this personal statement as a platform for building a collective identity, quickly shifting to “We all just wanted to write these notes,” and “We did love dinosaurs once” (Indiefeed). This sense of collective subjectivity would be especially intense because the audience would physically experience the poem together. Just as the carnival redefined the body as “something universal, representing all people,” (Bakhtin 688) so do many Spoken Word poems define subjectivity beyond the individualized material body.

Bakhtin, Spoken Word Poetry, and Humor

Bakhtin argues that carnivalesque humor was all-inclusive, embracing everything in a spirit of ambivalent mirth:

The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity... *This laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time, mocking, deriding.* It asserts and denies. It buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.

(Bakhtin 12)

Carnival laughter is an instrument of alliance. Rather than targeting a “butt,” and thus “othering,” a person, place, thing, or ideology, laughter of the carnival is “ambivalent” (Bakhtin 12) and targets the “entire world” (Bakhtin 12). Everyone is equally indicted by the humor; everyone is the butt of the jokes. Bakhtin specifies that carnival laughter is not to be confused with laughter of the “satirist” (12), who “places himself above the object of his mockery.” Carnival laughter, or as Bakhtin calls it, “The people’s ambivalent laughter” (12) instead “expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it” (Bakhtin 12). While satire creates a power rift,

empowering the satirist and disempowering the target, the carnival deconstructs the very notion of power and equalizes all through humor. Swear words, social mockery, and bawdy jokes could be voiced freely in this equalizing space outside the restrictions of every day society. Such laughter was both cathartic and liberating, further serving to empower the people and create a sense of unity despite the powerful social hierarchy.

Many Spoken Word Poems utilize this all-inclusive carnivalesque humor. Anis Mojgani's poem, entitled "Here Am I," particularly exemplifies how laughter can induce unity in an audience. Mojgani commences the poem with a description of childhood dreams that both evoke a sense of nostalgia and reveal the ethnocentric ideology of America:

We all wanted something dear./ We all wanted that high school sweetheart./ We
wanted to be young and white in the fifties, with meatloaves, and sock-hops, and
lawns so perfect they looked like Clark Gable was kissing them/ (Indiefeed)

With his assertion that "We all wanted to be young and white in the fifties," and references to "Meatloaf," and "Sock Hops," Mojgani encourages laughter in his audience, letting them smile together at a naive concept of America that some perhaps believed—or wanted to believe—as children about what it meant to be American. Mojgani is taking divisive hegemonic images of white, middle class America and paradoxically using them to unite the audience through humor. This feeling of unity intensifies as Mojgani rhapsodizes about how "We" dreamed of "meeting a girl that was thirteen and alive" and later of "Pulling small-town waitresses into backseats and trailer-park homes" and finding "passion" together. Once again, he is using hegemonic white, middle-class, heterosexual, masculine-oriented imagery to unite listeners in laughter at the stereotype's

naivety. His words are especially ironic because of his physical presence onstage as a half-black half-Persian man who does not resemble the stereotypes of which he speaks. Laughter at this joke both acknowledges the power of such stereotypes in American culture while exposing them as romanticized depictions of an oppressive, violent, and stifling time in American history. Like Bakhtin's description of the carnival laughter, this humorous section of "Here Am I," is both "gay" and "deriding" (Bakhtin 12). Unlike satire, there is no butt to this laughter which envelopes listener and poet alike. As the audience unites through this carnivalesque, all-inclusive laughter, the stereotypes lose their power as experiences to be ideally emulated.

Bakhtin, Spoken Work, and Community

Bakhtin asserts that this sense of unity was so powerful at the medieval carnival that it inspired a sense of Utopia:

People were, so to speak, reborn for new, *purely human relations*. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. *The utopian ideal and the realistic merged* in this carnival experience, unique of its kind. (687)

The medieval carnival induced a sense of freedom through action rather than thought, enacting utopian ideals in the real world using "purely human relations" (Bakhtin 687). People were allowed to imagine the antithesis of their stratified society and act out that dream with others in their immediate community. In the Feast of Fools, for example, a brief social revolution occurs in which the fool was crowned king for day and religious, gender, and class norms could be challenged freely (Bakhtin 77). This experience of

empowerment allegedly remained within them after the carnival and allowed them to conceptualize, hope for, and work for a more equitable society.

Spoken Word Poetry utilizes the power of community and human interaction to similarly evoke a brief sense of Utopia. In her article, “Utopia in Performance,” Jill Dolan argues that performance can inspire moments “in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other... in which social discourse articulates the possible, rather than the insurmountable obstacles to human potential” (164). As Dolan asserts, Spoken Word Poems can arouse “Love, not just for a partner as the domestic scripts of realism so often emphasize, but for other people, for a more abstracted notion of ‘community’, or for an even more intangible idea of ‘humankind’” (164). For example, in Anis Mojgani’s poem, “Come Closer,” he addresses an abstract “You:”

come you wooden museums

you gentle tigers

you negro farces in two broken scenes.

come rusting giants

I see teacups in your smiles upside down glowing

your hands are like my heart.

on some days how it trembles.

let us hold them together.

I too am like you.

at times am filled with fear.

but like a hallway must find the strength to walk through it.

walk through this with me.

walk through this with me. (*Indiefeed*)

The “You” whom Mojgani speaks to in the poem is not a lover, but mankind personified in the audience and all potential audiences. Mojgani briefly touches upon racial divisions, referencing “negro farces,” yet the overall implication is that we can “come closer” and unite in our common emotionality. He specifically suggests uniting in “fear”—An emotion that frequently divides people—Inviting audiences to imagine finding “strength” and uniting in their common vulnerability. As “Come Closer” illustrates, Spoken Word Poetry creates a space where people can feel communally allied with each other and conceptualize a broader sense of community that transcends socially defined categories of identity.

Mojgani incorporates this carnivalesque sense of unity and interconnectivity in many of his most popular poems. He elaborates on writing “Come Closer,” explaining his desire to collectively empower people:

“Come Closer” is very much rooted in... that idea that we are connected as individuals and we are very much more alike then we think... One thing that is inherently similar, even if nothing else is, it’s that there are amazing powers in all of us. There is a nobility, and that potential, that nobility... It doesn’t appear only at certain points in your life. You were born with it. And you’ll die with it... *One is always powerful. You always were. You always will be. You are right now.*

Like the carnival, Spoken Word Poetry can be a space of collective empowerment outside the social hierarchy and “established order” (Bakhtin 686). Of course, not all Spoken Word poems focus on these Utopic themes of innate human “nobility” (Mojgani) and our “amazing powers” (Mojgani), yet perhaps Mojgani’s exploration of these themes have

contributed to his immense success. His poetry demonstrates an exciting potential for this multifaceted form: to induce a strong feeling of unity and potential through language and body. The sense of communal empowerment could be a vital step toward questioning and changing the social inequalities that many institutions perpetuate.

This sense of unity and “human relations” (Bakhtin 687) in Spoken Word connects to its increasing popularity in America. If one is outside the Spoken Word community, the movement is easy to trivialize as a handful of poets at bars and coffeehouses. However, Spoken Word is the fastest growing grass roots poetry movement in history of America (Smith 116). As Marc Smith, the founder of Slam Poetry, asserts in his essay “About Slam Poetry,” Spoken Word has “brought together communities of people who share a passion for creativity, words, and performance and has turned into a worldwide movement fostering free statement and a celebration of communal human spirit” (120). More than forty American cities sponsor poetry slams (Rodriguez 208), an amazing fact considering the first slam happened only twenty-five years ago, invented by a construction worker in a blue collar Chicago bar (64). There are three nationally sanctioned annual contests, and a nonprofit entitled Poetry Slam, Inc. oversees slams all over the world (Woods 18). Documentaries, books, and films have all been made about Spoken Word (Woods 18). Every continent—including Antarctica—Participates in poetry slams. As Scott Woods quips in his article “Poetry Slams: the Democracy of Art,” “Slam has given forum and microphone to more poets than any other avenue for poets in the last twenty years, and its influence continues to grow” (19). Spoken Word is more than amusement; it is space that satisfies many Americans’ need for freedom.

Conclusion

We need to rethink the way we determine Spoken Word Poetry's value and cease debating whether it is "good" and "bad" art. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith suggests, the very notion of "good" and "bad" art is simplistic and dismissive of art's contingency on overarching social norms:

The value... the "goodness" or "badness" of an evaluation, like that of anything else... is itself contingent and thus a matter *not of its abstract "truth value"* but of *how well it performs various desired/able functions for the various people who may at any time be concretely involved with it* (Smith 22; Emphasis added.)

Spoken Word performs a significant function in America for the hundreds of thousands of people participating every year and deserves recognition as a legitimate artistic space in our culture. Although this function differs from those of the political sphere or literary canon, we must not "discount" or "pathologiz[e]" (Smith 18) Spoken Word's function merely because it departs from "privilege[ed]" (Smith 18) measurements of value. As a carnivalesque space, its very function is to contest "the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable," (Bakhtin) and subvert "the existing hierarchy, the existing religious political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions." We can thus perceive Spoken Word's contemporary value through this function as a carnivalesque space.

Such a space is vital to imagining what "standing united" might look like in America. Spoken Word Poetry lets Americans play with the cultural fractures composing our disunity. As Garth Allen notes in his article "Performance in the Arts," "The Arts allow those who practice them and those who consume them to imagine

alternative states of mind and being. This is a political function of art. Imagined communities allow us to get critical distance and critical perspectives on our political condition and potentially transform it” (291). Carnavalesque spaces allow one to imagine and act out dreams of a more equitable society. Championing the reversal of power structures, a re-imagining of the body, all-inclusive laughter, and a communal spirit, Spoken Word Poetry provides a stark contrast to America’s political sphere and literary canon. Perhaps at this moment in our nation’s history, listening united is more important than standing united.

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Appendix I

Transcription of Interview with Anis Mojgani
December 12, 2010

MOLLY: Would you mind speaking about your background before you discovered spoken word?

ANIS: I'm originally from New Orleans. I grew up there. I had a very strong interest in art. Visual art. And thankfully it was something that was supported by the folks. They saw the importance of art and creativity today. They made sure it was part of our growing up experience. That was something always prevalent and in my thoughts. Then my senior year of high school I just had a mess of electives and filled them with creative classes. And one of them was creative writing. And writing was something I hadn't explored. It was always drawing, a little bit of painting. And the poetry section of creative writing, it was fun. It was something that registered in me. I was like... There's a different part of my brain that's being turned on by this than by drawing. So then following year in college, I ended up taking a poetry class... and it ended up becoming a daily connection, just like drawing. Prior to that, the summer before going into school, I had read an article about Poetry Slam, and there was something about it that was really, really fascinating to me. I really thought it was awesome that this thing had been created that said whoever you are, you're allowed to participate. You don't have to have published this book, or have this degree, or stay with this person. All you have to do is be an individual who is trying to express something inside of you, and have the desire to get up and share it with a room full of people. I thought that that was really fascinating. And I thought that the idea of saying to an audience that poetry is relevant. Poetry is not something that is just for two percent of the people. Poetry is for you as well. And to show you that it's for you, you're allowed to say "I really like this poem, I'm going to give it an eight. I really don't like that poem, I'm going to give it a two." That the power of poetry was given back to people, and they were allowed to say "This is something that is relevant in my life. I thought that poetry was something that wasn't for me." And the poems that I read in that article just seemed so much more... urgent and more immediate than a lot of the poems I'd read up to that point in school and whatnot. They were just different. I was like... Wow. These are just people writing poems about their experiences, and the language is just so fresh and raw and different and imaginative. Over the next few years in college, it was something I really wanted as part of my life. There was a poet that came to perform named Jeffrey McDaniel. He was the first poet that I saw perform live, and I was like "This is amazing. This is unbelievable. This is exactly what I want to participate in. There wasn't any open mics or anything until I think maybe my third year of school. I started participating in that. And it became something that funneled an aspect of my creativity that I really, really enjoyed.

MOLLY: About that funneling a certain aspect... What about specifically Spoken Word has attracted you as a creative outlet?

ANIS: There's a couple reasons. One, simply the act of poetry is really an amazing thing. It is something that humans use to explore the greater truths of what it means to be human. To me, that's relevant in all aspects of living for all of us. If we figure out and explore what it means to be human, on whatever level, why do I like this tea, why do I cry about this, why do I laugh about this, all these different things, why do these things affect me? Then society as a whole becomes more engaged, becomes more relevant, becomes more enlightened. So there's simply that aspect of poetry that is attractive to me. As well as inside of poetry, anything is able, anything is capable. That if I say a snake is a knife, then a snake is a knife, and if I don't want to say why that's the case, I don't have to say. If I want to, I'm allowed to, but if I don't want to, I don't have to. It's not even so much that poetry is explaining truths that the truths are then always understood. I envision it that poetry is tapping into a language that is visceral and that is ancient. And it's a language we don't necessarily speak anymore, and so it's like we have to translate whatever it is into our native tongue, for me, English, and so translate this language of poetry into English, and then I'm able to write a poem. And so sometimes, there's things that get lost in translation for myself, and so, if I say that a snake is a knife, then it just is. And it doesn't have to be for any certain reason. So that's what attracted to me on the poetic side. In regards to Spoken Word, what I love about it mostly is there's no buffer, there's no thing that the artist must speak through to engage the audience. There's no canvas. There's no photograph. There's no film.

MOLLY: No literary magazine.

ANIS: Yes, there's no book. There's nothing. It's an individual who is standing before a person or body of people and says, "Hey. There's something inside of my heart. There's something inside of my head. These are things I'm trying to express. Here it is." I think that important and relevant art is art that takes risks. And that for artists to make themselves vulnerable in front of another human being, it is one of the riskiest things one can do, separate of art, just in life in general. That's the kind of art I'm attracted to. That's the kind of art I'm attracted to making. That's the kind of art I respond to. In regards to Spoken Word, it's very unique in regards to where it sits in regard to other art forms. It's the only art form I can think of where there isn't a buffer. Definitely, we tend to put up certain buffers. There might be a way we perform a poem, a certain character, performance, or a certain "schtick" but at its heart, there's nothing the artist is speaking through. And for me, that's what's really, really awesome about Spoken Word.

MOLLY: Are there certain topics or subjects that you think are more suitable for Spoken Word to explore?

ANIS: That's interesting. I think perhaps yes. I don't think I've ever been asked that question, so I don't know, I'd have to think about it. When I approach making a work, there's definitely certain things that to me, say this thing I'm trying to express is better suited through making music. Or perhaps that thing I'm trying to express is better suited painting a painting. Perhaps it's through a poem. Perhaps it's through performing a poem. There's definitely certain things, or topics, or things that one wants to package ones communication, that are better suited to certain mediums. In regards to specifics, I don't

know. I do think it's interesting, a few years ago I was comparing the way I make different work, and that there's different things that I explore through different mediums. I found that when I was painting, the things that I as painting... When I'd be painting, a lot it wasn't ideas, or themes, or specifics, but at it's foundation, was very much an exploration of making something that showed to others that they are allowed to explore their imagination. That doesn't necessarily mean it had to be awesome or have a specific purpose. The imagination is an amazing thing to explore. Whereas a lot of my poetry, a lot of the poetry I'd been writing at the time, it explored that as well, but it also explored a lot of the things that I think connect humans. It was about trying to communicate to others their worth and their inherent powers and beauty. I feel that we're spiritual beings. I feel that I'm a spiritual beings. And I feel that my poems explore that struggle of being a spiritual, being a metaphysical beings. Whereas a lot of my paintings and drawings just explore imagination. They're not spiritual. It's not spiritual visual work that I'm creating. But it is spiritual literary work that I'm creating.

MOLLY: Why is it you feel like language has more of a spiritual aspect?

ANIS: I don't know. I could come up with some reasons, but I don't know if it's specific. I just know that when I sit down to start writing, I follow the path that the writing takes me. And when I sit down to draw, I follow the path that my drawing takes me. And those two things take me down very different paths. Maybe to the same woods, but they are different paths. I think there is something about the urgency of being onstage. That it's like right then and there. This juncture of time. Not before and not after. I have this person's attention. I have these people's ears and hearts. Although I don't think it's my place to say what another artist's duty or responsibility is, for me, as an artist, there's a lot of different things I want to explore. But there was a long period where I felt that if I had three minutes, say in a poetry slam to talk to a group of people, I don't want to spend that three minutes talking about something that to me, isn't important. That hopefully someone will walk away with a completely different outlook of say, a war, themselves, or the people they interact with. That was very much the foundation of the work I was making. If there's work that's like that, I tend to find myself writing in Poetry and Spoken Word. That being said, I think that in regards to Spoken Word and what things are better suited for, anything that has the artist exploring what it means to make art that disappears. Art that is not going to stay solid. You and the audience together are creating art for that two minutes, three minutes, five minutes, for whatever I is, and that may take many different forms. It might be something that is very proactive and trying to ignite fires inside of people. I think Spoken Word poetry is very well suited for that because it's something that is theatrical, but it's also something that is trying to come from—hopefully—a sincere part of the artist. I think that doing stuff that is really, really strange and bizarre and funny and silly, all those are very, very well-suited to the Spoken Word.

MOLLY: How do you refute arguments such as “Literature does not translate into action. Literature does not change anything.”

ANIS: I think when there's arguments like that, I'm not saying that people of that mindset can't or don't or won't change, I think very often, if there's something we

believe in or see a certain way, then whatever is brought into that puzzle doesn't have a leg to stand on. It's like if someone was saying clouds were made of metal And you were like, No, clouds are not made of metal, and this is why clouds are not made of metal. And you explain all these things to them, which of course make complete sense, because clouds are not made of metal. And over the course of the discussion, you discover, they do not see there's a blue sky. The foundation of what it stands on, is something completely fanciful so you don't have a leg to stand on, saying clouds are not made of metal. And I think there's validity in literature or all arts being escapist. But I know that art changes people because it has changed me. And so it is very frustrating to me when people take their experience and thoughts and project that onto the world, like "Within my experience, art has never changed me, if has only removed some of the pain for a moment, and I was still the same at the end of the journey. So that must be how everyone's experience is." And that's not the case. In my experience, art has changed my life. From the many years of participating in spoken word and writing poetry and performing it, I know that it has changed other people. Either from direct contact from being informed how my work has changed others and also how other people's work has changed me and seeing how other people's work affecting and changing people. That is something that's tangible. Two years ago, when I was doing our annual revival tour, and Andrea Gibson was touring with us, at the end of the show, this one girl came up to her, talking to her, and explaining to her. I caught glimpses of the conversation in my ear. This young girl, seventeen years old, weeping and crying, sharing with her about some of the really traumatic and horrible stuff she'd had to experience over the course of her short life. And that Andrea's work enabled her to come through it. That's not bull shit. That's not escapism. Art saves people's lives. Just because it hasn't saved one individual's life doesn't mean it hasn't saved other people's lives. It made me think of this Lupe Fiasco song when he's talking about hip hop saving this guy's life. For a lot of people, hip hop is awesome. For a lot of people, hip hop isn't. For a lot of people, hip hop is awesome because it makes the feel good, it inspires them, it changes their outlook. For some people, they love hip hop because literally, it has saved their lives. If hip hop wasn't there, if rock and roll wasn't there, if poetry wasn't there, if Picasso wasn't there, they'd be dead. Either because of their surroundings or because of themselves. I don't know what someone might say to refute that, but art has definitely changed me.

MOLLY: It seems to me the change we've been talking about, it's something that's difficult to empirically measure. People that are empirically minded tend to have a difficult time comprehending that kind of change.

ANIS: And yes, I understand, How many times has something affected me and I thought "Oh man, this is great! I'm going to go out and do this!" And it doesn't happen. But if I look at the big picture, I can't measure what my life would be like if I didn't have art. I can look at this world as a whole, and see how art has affected the different parts of it, and think "If we were to remove all the art from this world, cease all funding it, and somehow remove all art from the world, what would we be left with?" Not much, in my personal opinion.

MOLLY: In that line of thinking, how do you hope your art—Your Spoken Word Poetry specifically—Affects people?

ANIS: Even though, as I was saying, my visual art and writing take two different paths, a lot of the reasons come down to the same thing. If someone is affected by it, I would hope that one of the ways that they are affected by it is that it turns on a different part of their brain. This is what poetry can be. Perhaps I can explore this, and if not poetry, perhaps I can explore something else. That's one of the largest things. And snowballing off of that, I think that art empowers people. I think art very much enables others to recognize self-worth and recognize self-empowerment and recognize that they have a place in this world that is not necessarily arbitrary or meaningless. And I'd hope there'd be something in my work—not necessarily every piece—but if there's something that affects people that way, it's alright by me.

MOLLY: There's a scholar I found very helpful when thinking about Spoken Word. Her name is Jill Dolan. She has this idea that an audience during some sort of really powerful performance piece achieves a fleeting sense of utopia because they are collectively feeling emotions, despite the differences of their background. For a moment they're united. Can you respond to that idea?

ANIS: I think it's pretty interesting. Like I was saying before, what's interesting to me about Spoken Word, yes as an individual artist, one is making something to share with others. But that thing is completely different than what ends up happening. It is the audience and the artist together making a piece of art that solely exists within that frame of time and space. That's really exciting to me. To get to participate and have all these bodies participating. And there's something really awesome of this collective spirit. Of regardless of the differences, we're all feeling something. Maybe it's a different shape but it's the same color. And I think that's the case with a lot of art. I find that the more specific I am with my art, the more people it affects. And the more people I encounter, the more effective I am. There's definitely some kind of collective unity that brings people together regardless of those divides. Our similar experience overrides our singular experiences. Our personal frame of reference for our life becomes very present in our field of vision from hearing about some else's life and frame of reference. I think that there's an awesome, empowering collectiveness of all that.

MOLLY: You have been quoted as saying politics is the opiate of the masses. Do you want to talk about that and what Spoken Word poetry can offer people that the political sphere cannot or does not?

ANIS: One of the things that irks me about politics is that all this shit happens, and nothing happens. People involved with it very often just like to talk about that. It's as if there's this political room and all this stuff is being conversed and discussed. While outside, there's all this stuff that's going on that has nothing to do with what's going on inside the room. Whenever I encounter folks that are very politically driven, basically, they're driven because of the politics, not because of what the politics need to accomplish. Politics should be a tool that implements societal structure. And the best

societal structure is the societal structure that holds up society, and that's all of society. Not different parts of it. You don't build a house that just has a structurally sound bedroom. Or just a sound bathroom. You build a house that all parts you're able to live in and exist inside of. I think what unfortunately ends up happening with politics is that people focus on how do we fix politics? How do we save politics? Who cares about fucking politics? We should use politics to save people. It's like treating the symptom as opposed to figuring out the cure. So that's what strikes me about that. Hearing about politics and Spoken Word always makes me think about...Harold Bloom

MOLLY: The one that criticized Spoken word?

ANIS: Yeah. The one that went to one slam and thought that it was horrible and he thought it was the death of art because he thought politics had no place in art. I thought that was ridiculous for a couple reasons. For one, there always seems to be this idea that we as a people know what the lifespan of art is. I don't understand. To go back to hip hop... There are so many people who go "Hip hop is dead. It was so awesome in 1988. It was so awesome in 1996. It's dead right now." It's twenty years old! It's an art form! You're telling me that something that speaks to people inside their hearts... It's like saying dance is dead. A two-year-old when they hear music, they respond to it. Dance is very much not dead. No art form is dead. No art form is going to die. It will definitely change, and it may change in a way that we as individuals do not feel is pertinent or relevant, but to say that anything will cause the death of art other than the death of a species is impossible. And I think that art is a way that should... not should... Art is a way to explore the truths of what it means to be a person. There's always been political art. It has taken different shapes and different forms. I seriously doubt that Harold Bloom would say that Brecht was the death of art. And indeed, the majority of Brecht's work was written with the purpose of making political change. Of crafting plays and directing them, presenting them to a group of people, that hopefully would not provide escapism. But hopefully, would cross their mind, this is a play you're watching. You need to get up and storm city and hall. Whether or not that actually happened is irrelevant in regards to this. The purpose was to write work that hopefully instilled the fire to make change in society. That to me is what politics is. Politics is the thing that instills those changes in society. So if one is writing and creating or making art that is trying to instill change in society, then politics definitely has a place in art. I mean like Guernica is a response to war, a war that was created because of political reasons, at least in my opinion. Politics is on the shoulder of the individual. If someone makes art with that connection, then that is their task. That is their self-imposed duty. It doesn't make their art irrelevant because of politics. What would make their art irrelevant is whether or not its having its effect, whether or not its doing what it set out to do.

MOLLY: In that same line of thought, you're talking about this long tradition of global art, Spoken Word art. So my question is, why is there this movement now of Spoken Word now? What need is not being filled that spoken word is filling?

Anis: I doubt there's one thing that creates this, but I think that Spoken Word has grown over the past X amount of years in conjunction with technological things. I remember when I first was getting into Spoken Word Poetry, being introduced to artists, and not

having any way to getting exposed to their work and having that extra introduction. Now, if you go to YouTube and type in spoken word, you get a thousand videos. There's really something amazing about that. Getting to see something you wouldn't see before. So I think that to me, what is amazing about spoken word is that ultimately, there is something there for everybody. There's definitely ideas and connotations and stereotypes about what Spoke Word entails. But at the end of the day, it comes down to someone who wrote something, and is speaking it out loud. And if the amount of people who write things and share them out loud that is infinite. And there's an infinite amount of types that receive that message. And if you're like "I don't really get down with loud yelling political poems," and you were presented that there is more in the circle of Spoken Word, you can jump in there. And for everyone that jumps in, they can say, "You have to check out this poetry thing." I don't know how many of my Facebook friends have never seen me, never seen a show of mine. Perhaps they've seen a video. Perhaps they read a book. But more likely or not, they were exposed by it from someone else who got exposed from it from somebody else. I did a show with a nonprofit last January, and I did that show because somebody sent Jamie, the founder of Turret Love, a video of "Shake the Dust." And he checked that out and said, we gotta have Anis come and do something with this show. He'd never seen me. He never met me. It was just exposure from a video. And from doing that show X amount of times, you know, 200, 300, 500 people there and got exposed to it. They're like, oh wow, perhaps I connected with this. Let me share this with someone else. Who shares it with someone else. And someone else. I don't know if that accounts for why it's huge. But it's definitely able to reach people in a different way in the last ten years. Because it's not, say, like a book. A lot of folks, maybe they put together their little chapbook, and it goes basically to people in that community, poets and people who enjoy going to poetry events. With something like YouTube, you're able to put a video out into the ether, and 5 million people might come across it. And out of those 5 million people, maybe a thousand people will get connected. And out of those thousand people, they turn on exponentially another three thousand people. I don't know if it's necessarily the only reason it's so popular, but I do think its contributed a lot to why it's had this exponential growth over the past five years or so.

MOLLY: I wanted to go to a theme you've been talking about. This idea of a connecting thread in the human experience. Could you talk about this belief that there is a universal truth that can be glimpsed in art?

ANIS: There's many poems I've read over the years that for whatever reason, they speak to me. I don't know why they speak to me. I'm a black Iranian male of 33, 34 years of age, who was raised in the south. Middle class. Maybe lower middle class, upper lower class. And why is it that when I read a poet by Steve Dobbins I think of a poem by him is the shit. His experience is extraordinary different that my experience. Why is it that when I read a book by Patricia Smith, a thirty year old black woman from Chicago in the Northeast, whose writing poem of my hometown, I have a connection to it. And not simply because it's written about Katrina. There's a wealth of work about Katrina that doesn't always register or connect with me. But the experience she's had in her life led her to writing those specific poems, and those specific poems spoke to me. And I

seriously doubt that the only people who connected with a national book award finalist were all from New Orleans. I definitely do agree that there are truths to behold that are just within our frame of reference, that are based on culture, based on economic status. But I think we are larger than the sum of our individual parts, just as we are larger than the sum of the parts that simply surround us. There's a reason why when something is funny, I laugh. And there's a reason why sometimes I don't know why it's funny. And sometimes I want to deconstruct why it makes me laugh, and sometimes I think, Well, I'm not going to figure out why it makes me laugh. There's a multitude of poems and art that speaks to me and I can't say why. I don't know how many times I've gone off the stage and heard "Man, I really like that poem you did. Such and such poem. I don't know what you were talking about at all. I don't know why I liked it. But I really liked it." And it goes back to that idea I've said earlier that poetry and art as a whole is something that is ancient in us, that speaks in a language that we don't speak, and so there's parts inside of our body that speak those parts. And those things, they have a conversation, and we get parts of that conversation, and we translate it to our tongue. Those truths aren't always necessarily tangible truths to be discovered, but I don't think all truths are tangible truths meant to be discovered.

MOLLY: You have a sense of spirituality in your work. Sometimes optimistic, such as "you make the lord happy," and sometimes darker, like "Gentlemen have you forgotten your god?" So what are you talking about when you talk about God?

ANIS: That is something that has shaped and hanged over the years. Ultimately, I believe there is a creative force in the universe, and I think that the idea of a God is not always... I speak to what I think in that poem the "Branches are Heavy." It's like saying here we have defined what God is, and we have defined God as this evasive spirit, this omnipotent thing that can never understand or comprehend fully. But, even though we've defined him as that, we now somehow have the power to put him in this one little box. I think that the idea of God to me what God is takes many forms and many shapes and those three letters are a word. When I think of God, I think of the universe as a whole, essentially. And over the course of my life—Because I can only speak to my own experience—Over the course of my life, there are things that happen within the moving universe that are amazing to me. Amazing that it continually roles, and is continuously is recreating, copying, perpetuating itself. And that there are patterns in this world that we cannot put down on paper as to why it happens. I think that when one converses with the universe, the universe responds. And it is like art, it is not something we can automatically understand or comprehend. It is like this part of you that's having a conversation with the universe and you don't even know because you don't speak that tongue. You're just having a cup of coffee and there's this part that's speaking to another part of the world. And to me, that's the shape of God. God isn't necessarily this thing that you pray to and hope will not hate you in the next world. It's—There's certain undeniable facts that if one opted to not kill of the world we live on, to not destroy the universe we live in, than there's certain ways society should be able to run. And ultimately, I think that God—the word God—is a steward to the universe for what God actually is. And that steward is saying "If you want to be a productive society, here are some ideas that can

help you achieve that.” So to me it’s something that is constantly evasive and can’t really put my finger on it.

MOLLY: Why did you choose to combine “Come Closer/ Here Am I?”

ANIS: When I do a show, there’s something I think that is always really weird about clapping. I think it’s a really awesome thing that allows pauses for both the audience and the artist. It also contributes to the environment, to the dialogue between artist and audience, between those two entities. But sometimes it also feels really weird. Like in some Big Broadway Musical and like “Here is some big song. We’ll stop. Hear some applause. Then continue on with our next song. Stop, hear some applause.” And it being this thing where we’ve gone to that experience, but in that two-hour long experience, we’re going to keep stopping. Halting that experience. And there’s times when that works and times when that feels really strange. So when I do shows, I’m always in conflict about this. I like the idea of going up and just doing a show. Here I come up here and have these individual poems, but I’m also giving you a collective whole. And I’m taking you on this journey with me for fifteen minutes, twenty minutes, thirty minutes—whatever it is. So there’s often in my shows where I like to combine poems simply for that reason. Let me go from this poem to this poem. Because I don’t want to stop. And it doesn’t feel like a stop is warranted. It doesn’t feel like.... Let’s not stop just yet. Let’s continue on this ride. Let’s continue on this roll. And I think it’s also something that is interesting for both artist and audience. Like for me as an artist, getting to find ways of combining work that is old to me. Or getting to combine it so it becomes something new and different. And for the audience as well if they’re familiar with my work. If they’re like “Oh, this poem come closer that I like” And I get to the end of it and they’re like “Oh! It’s not over! It’s going into this new poem that I like!”

MOLLY: Can you talk about the process for writing “Come Closer/ Here am I”?

ANIS: My process for writing as a whole is not very specific from the onset. It’s like Okay I have this idea, let me explore this idea. My process is very much rooted in allowing myself to start writing. It’s like running down a hill, and the closer you get to gravity on the bottom, the more that inertia and the weight of your body is pulling you forward. It is the same thing with making art. Okay. Let me just start moving. And the more that I move, the more this work will be inspired to be created and to be energized. So when I go to work, in the beginning, it’s just typing. And at some point, some idea or theme reveals myself and hooks me and I follow that idea. And that’s where the shaping happens. And I return to that shaping. I can’t say what the process was for those poems. I feel that “Come Closer,” I feel fairly certain there was an idea in my head... It’s ridiculous to me the thought that there’s so many people in this world that are not ever presented with the idea or the possibility of the amazingness inside of them. Some of them are told the complete opposite. That is something that is one of the great tragedies to me. I’m a Baha’i, and there’s a line from the ba’hai writings that says “Noble have we been created.” And this idea that human beings are built and made not with original sin but with inherent nobility to me is amazing and astounding. And something I wholeheartedly believe. And a lot of my work is rooted in. And “Come Closer” is very much

rooted in wanting to communicate that to them. Whether or not it was a tangible thing of “I need to sit down and write about this” or whether I was writing and that popped out, very often, there might be a line that pops into my head. And I tuck that away and see if there’s something I can fit that into. “Here am I,” I guess that’s a much older piece. I think I wrote that in like ’99 or 2000. It’s been at least a decade since I wrote that poem. And you can hear it. It’s very much a different kind of poem. But it’s very much connected to that idea of that we are connected as individuals and we are very much more alike than we think. And in those similarities, one of the things that is similar, regardless of all extraneous stuff, one thing that is inherently similar even if nothing else is, it’s that there are amazing powers in all of us. There is a nobility, and that potential, that nobility, there’s no on/off switch. It’s not that there’s not an on/off switch. It doesn’t appear only at certain points in your life. You were born with it. And you’ll die with it. That idea that one is always powerful. You always were you always will be and you are right now. So for that poem, I can’t speak to its specific process, but it’s rooted in those ideas I’ve been exploring on again off again for the past fifteen years.

MOLLY: When you’re writing, is the performance generated from the text, or do you keep it in mind as you write?

ANIS: More the former. There’s definitely like pieces, or ideas in my head when the excitement I feel about performing, definitely can give me the urge to write. Like the poet Roger Bonair-Agard. He’s an amazing writer he’s an amazing poet. Every time I hear him, I get filled with such desire and excitement and inspiration. And I get such inspiration to create work to perform with similar passion that he performs. And that’s one of those times I side with your professor, that inspiration very often doesn’t stick with me to get to a computer. For me, I have to do the act of writing when it’s warm. I can’t just perform. For me, writing will always come first. And I believe what Robert Smith says that in writing a poem, ninety percent of the work is done when you go to the page. And I think that’s true. If I have a good foundation of what makes a good poem, then hopefully I’ll be able to tap into that and share it in a sincere way. There’s definitely times when I’m writing and there might be something performance-wise that might feed into it. Or perhaps I’m reading it out loud and on the page, it’s better like this, but rhythmically and spoken, I’ll make those changes for this.

MOLLY: It’s interesting that you use the phrases “Act of writing,” or the “Act of poetry.” It’s a good reminder that it’s doing something.

ANIS: I think it’s very much an act. A lot of my work is inspired by the act of doing. Writing begets more writing begets more writing begets more writing. Inspiration is something that doesn’t filter into creating work I think. When I was younger, I’d get inspired and I’d just have this burning desire and I’d carry around a notebook and write down my thoughts. But in a way, that was something very different than really working on what I was creating. I have so many pages of things I will never go back into. And that’s fine. They were meant to be an outlet of that inspiration. And sometimes that inspiration carried over into finished work. Now, I have to recognize that if I want to make work, I have to make work. I can’t sit around and wait to be inspired. I can’t, when

I'm inspired, suddenly jump out of a movie theatre from watching a film that inspired me, leave the theatre before the second half of the movie, jump on my bike, bike all the way home, get into my room, turn on my computer, sit down and expect that energy to like— You know, the work is only going to come from me doing it. From punching in the clock and writing. It's definitely an action.

MOLLY: What are you planning to do tonight?

ANIS: I was hoping to do "Orchards," but I haven't done it in a while, and I can't really practice. I think I'll do work from the book that just came out. Probably all work will come from that. It will be book-heavy show tonight.

MOLLY: Thank you so much for your time.

ANIS: Hope it helped.